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ABSTRACT

There are a number of reasons for the lack of parent interest in Title I Parent Advisory Councils (PAC). There are too many officials charged with implementing Title I who do not want to be bothered with an effective PAC. In addition, many officials do not seriously consider the experiences parents bring to their membership and do not have the skills to effectively involve the PAC. The lack of clarity about PAC's role and responsibilities, a lack of planning, a limited number of PAC meetings, and the rapid turnover in PAC membership also contribute to the erosion of parent interest. Specific actions which can be taken to stimulate and maintain parent interest include: (1) a "job description" should be developed for PAC members; (2) local school officials should communicate that PAC is a valued partner in the operation of a Title I project; (3) PAC members should be encouraged to initiate activities; (4) each PAC member should adopt a specific program and follow its progression; and (5) working with PAC should be seen as a continuing process of leadership development. (Author/EB)

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"Maintaining Parent Interest"

in

Title I Parent Advisory Councils

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Since shortly after the conclusion of the first efforts to implement the parent involvment mandates of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, questions have been raised about parents' interest in serving on the Parent Advisory Council. What is defined as a lack of parent interest is most often manifest in poor attendance at Parent Advisory Council meetings, poor participation in PAC activities, or in merely finding enough people who want to serve on the PAC. Sometimes questions about parents' interest in the PAC have been raised by school officials who have made sincere, but ultimately unsuccessful, efforts to involve parents in advising the local school district "in planning for, and implementation and evaluation of" Title I funded programs and projects. At other times these questions have been raised as a defense against charges that Parent Advisory Councils are ineffective, or that local school districts have done too little to ensure their effectiveness.

Before we can profitably discuss how parents' interest in Parent Advisory Councils can be stimulated and maintained, it is important to make some general observations about factors which impact on the nature of parent involvement in Title I. One such generalization is that unless federal, state, and local officials charged with administering Title I really believe the law's parent involvement mandates are important, and unless there are programs of outreach and enforcement to make that belief a reality, the label of "lack of interest" cannot be applied to parents alone. Up to now there has been more lack of interest in parent involvement by those persons charged with

carrying out the mandates of Title I law and regulations then there has been by persons serving on Parent Advisory Councils. One is tempted to say that those responsible for implementing Title I must do more than comply with the letter of the law and regulations mandating Parent Advisory Councils. But the widespread violation of even these minimal requirements is so serious that in many places it would be a step forward if officials would honestly adhere to the letter of the law and regulations, and if other responsible officials would more effectively monitor and enforce compliance with those requirements.

We must also recognize that there are too many officials charged with implementing Title I who simply do not want to be bothered with an effective Parent Advisory Council. If the law did not require it they would not have Councils at all. They either view a Parent Advisory Council as an inconvenience and a nuisance, or they conjure up fears about the potential for the Council to challenge their authority or to "meddle" in school affairs. These attitudes are at the root of so many actions and inactions which characterize how local school officials relate to Parent Advisory Councils. For those school districts where this is the reality, talking about how to maintain the interest of PAC members is not the most honest or effective approach to the real problem.

The interest of PAC members is also influenced by the level of their previous experience in community organizations and with the public schools. While some PAC members may bring to their position a history of active involvment in civic groups and extensive contact and experience with the schools, this may not be the case with many others. Particularly in middle-size

and small communities, persons selected to serve on Parent Advisory Councils may have had very little experience as members of committees, advisory councils, or boards of community groups. Being an effective member of such deliberative bodies is a skill which most people have few opportunities to develop except through experience. Even though parents serving on Title I PACs care deeply about the education of their children, and others like them, they may not bring to the experience a well developed understanding of what they are supposed to do or how they are supposed to do it.

They may also have had few previous contacts with the local school officials and may understand little about the organization and governance of the local school system. Certainly the nature of various federally funded education programs, or their purpose, will be unfamiliar to them. While some parents may have had little reason to have had a working relationship with school officials, others may bring to their service on the PAC negative experiences or perceptions. There may be an atmosphere of distrust between community people and school officials because of past actions by the schools towards particular children, or groups of children, or because of the actions of parents towards the school. While these actions may have only involved a few people, or specific groups in the community, the "fallout" of the experiences may have influenced the perceptions and attitudes of a much broader group of parents or school officials.

The interest of PAC members, then, is determined at least in part by how effectively local school officials identify and respond to the experiences parents bring to their membership

on the Parent Advisory Council. If school officials begin their relationship with the PAC based on the assumption that parents understand and know how to function within the advisory council, that they can immediately grasp the complexities of the Title I program and the operation of the school system, and that they should appreciate and accept without question the existence and implementation of the Title I program simply because it is a supplementary benefit, then it is probable the PAC members and the school officials will be approaching each other on very different levels. Unless Title I officials make a conscientious effort to understand what parents need to be effective PAC members, and then respond to those needs, the parents may perceive the school officials are not interested in them, and they will respond to their responsibilities as PAC members in kind.

The interest of PAC members is more likely to wane when they are working with a local Title I official who does not know how to effectively involve the PAC, or who does not understand the PAC's role. Working with parents is a skill which too many local Title I officials have never been taught. Even though they may be receptive to carrying out the letter and spirit of Title I parent involvement mandates, they frequently have received no training in how to do so from state or federal Title I officials. In addition, the local officials have too often had no materials specifically designed to meet the informational needs of Title I PAC members. Under these circumstances even local officials who are well intentioned will find it difficult to know how to effectively involve parents and keep their interest. Until there are more aggressive efforts by the USOE Division of Education for the Disadvantaged and

and by state education agencies which have neglected to teach local officials the skills of working with parents, we can expect many of those officials to continue to relate to PACs in ways which will "turn off" parents.

Taking all these factors into account, it is obvious that maintaining the interest of parents is not simply a matter of improving the quality of cookies served at the PAC meeting. The fundamentals of maintaining parents' interest are not the use of gimmicks but the process of communicating to parents in many ways that their participation is essential and desirable. People--all of us--want to know that they matter, and that they have something of value to contribute. But in dealing with PAC members, too few school officials act within the context of this fact. Instead, parents are told in many different ways, both subtle and overt, that they as individuals and the PAC as a group does not matter and does not have anything to contribute. These spoken and unspoken messages are telegraphed so frequently that many PAC members come to feel the PAC is not worthy of their time and energy. It is important to identify practices which transmit these messages, and to consider alternative approaches which are more likely to stimulate parent interest:

(1) At too many organizational PAC meetings, practically the first words out of the mouth of the local Title I official is, "Your role is only advisory." Sometimes the official actually goes on to say that the advice of the PAC does not have to be taken by the local school or school district. The parents cannot help but hear the real message: "Your opinion doesn't matter. You don't count." Thus, from the outset a tone is established which is detrimental to the potential for active

parent involvement. How different it would be if the emphasis was on the necessity and value of the PAC's involvement and if the advisory relationship was discussed within that context. Even as an advisory body the PAC's role can be important and dynamic but this is seldom communicated to or understood by PACs.

(2) The lack of clarity about the PAC's role and responsibilities also contributes to the erosion of parent interest. It communicates to PAC members that no one takes the PAC seriously enough to spend the time and energy necessary to develop a clear statement of the PAC's role and responsibilities. Most of us can perform better when we know exactly what we are expected to do and when we understand why what we do is important. But if the local Title I official is confused and uncertain about why the PAC exists or what its responsibilities are, then it is not reasonable to expect the PAC to understand its purpose and direction. There are surely enough models of PACs which are interested and effective that there are examples of well developed statements of PACs' roles and responsibilities. Both DED and respective SEAs need to draw upon such models to assist local Title I officials in understanding in very specific terms the various roles and responsibilities which PACs can potentially fulfill. In turn, this information needs to be used by local Title I officials to develop <u>specific</u> tasks with PACs which are consistent with the intentions of mandated responsibilities set forth in Title I law and regulations.

(3) In many states and local school districts the whole system of communicating with PACs seems almost designed to discourage whatever interest the parents may have brought to their experience as PAC members. If the PAC is

given copies of the Federal and State Title I regulations and guidelines they may be accompanied with little or no explanation. As if these materials are not confusing enough, some local Title I officials use education and Federal program jargon which parents cannot be expected to understand. These practices are just another way of saying to parents that the Title I program is so complicated PAC members cannot possibly understand it, and given that fact they should defer to the professional status and expertise of the Title I official in charge. These practices convey quite clearly that even if the letter of the law is being obeyed, there is no real interest in encouraging or even facilitating the kind of parent involvement the law seems to have intended. All of this also illustrates the fact that good communication is the centerpiece of constructive relations between local Title I officials and Parent Advisory Councils, and that is essential to achieving effective parent involvement. In order to thoroughly understand how to best communicate with PAC members, many local Title I officials need training which will familiarize them with the needs and the perspectives of parents. Local officials must also be supported with materials developed by the DED and by SEAs which will make it possible for PAC members to understand and use the Title I laws, regulations, and guidelines. While some such materials exist there has been too little effort made to develop and distribute materials which facilitate communication with PACs concerning their roles, responsibilities, the requirements of Title I law and regulations, and the provisions of Title I itself.

(4) The lack of planning, the limited number of PAC meetings, and the rapid turnover in PAC membership are detrimental

to stimulating and maintaining parent interest. Many PACs have no clear goals or objectives for the year, and this is to be expected in those situations where neither the local Title I official nor the PAC has a clear understanding of the PAC's role. But if one takes seriously the legislative mandate that PACs have a responsibility for advising local education agencies "in planning for, and implementation and evaluation of," Title I programs and projects, then it is clear that is a heavy reasponsibility that requires planning. The work of the PAC cannot simply evolve from one meeting to the next. Local Title I officials must give careful thought to how the PAC can effectively execute its advisory role in a way that will strengthen the local Title I project. They must develop and share with the PAC a number of optional work plans for the school year and let the PAC decide which option, or combination of options, the PAC will adopt. That work plan needs to be keyed to the local school calendar, dates of PAC meetings, and the process of implementing the Title I project, evaluating it, and preparing the project application for the following year. The work plan should be realistic. It should reflect the interests, strengths, and limitations of the PAC members, including considerations of how much time they are able to give to carrying out the responsibilities, and what resources they will need to do so.

In order to fulfill its responsibilities the PAC should be encouraged to meet at least monthly during the school year, or not less than nine times. It is unfair to the PAC to suggest that it is only necessary to meet four or five times to carry out its responsibilities. The task of

getting the PAC organized, understanding what Title I is all about and how it works in the local district, and gaining the understanding and experience necessary to effectively advise the district on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the project is a complex process which cannot be accomodated in only several meetings during the year.

We should also remember that the interested, experienced, and knowledgeable PAC member is a valuable resource to the local school district and Title I official. Hopefully, the new requirements that parents serve two years on the PAC and that they be eligible for re-election will eliminate the year-to-year turnover in PAC members that has so frequently crippled the effectiveness of PACs. But even this provision can be circumvented if service on the PAC is so demoralizing that parents voluntarily withdraw after one year, or before. The turnover of PAC membership is something which should be the subject of routine scrutiny by state education agencies.

Finally, there are additional specific actions which can be taken to maintain parent interest:

(1) A "job description" for PAC members should be developed and circulated to all parents before the election of the PAC each year. This job description should set forth the role and responsibilities of the PAC, how many times it may meet during the school year, and illustrations of the kinds of specific tasks the PAC may work on during the year. The circulation of such a job description may help assure that only parents who are truly interested in the work of the PAC will be nominated and elected.

(2) Local school officials should communicate in a variety of ways that the Title I Parent Advisory Council is a valued partner in the operation of the Title I project. The PAC should be given visibility in school and district newsletters, in local news media, and on school bulletin boards. An interested and committed PAC member is, in fact, one of the too few citizens who is willing to back up his/her rhetorical support of public education with time and energy. That interest should not go unrecognized, even if school officials and the PAC member are in disagreement on substantive issues.

(3) PAC members should be encouraged to initiate activities which will produce results they can see. Nothing is more debilitating to parents' interest than to perceive that their involvement has produced nothing or improved nothing. However, if parents can see that their work has resulted in their comments being incorporated into the project application, or if they produce a report to the school board on how parents of program participants feel about the program, or if their work leads to strenthening the program evaluation and its interpretation to teachers and school officials, then they will be more likely to maintain their interest in the PAC.

(4) Each PAC member should be encouraged to "adopt" a specific Title I funded program activity and then relate to that activity periodically during the school year. This would involve a PAC member sitting in on a class in which children are receiving supplemental assistance provided by Title I, and it should be done at least three or four times a year. If a parent could not do this because he/she is working, then the parent should have three or four individual conferences with one Title I funded

teacher or aide. The point of this activity is to put the parent in direct contact with the Title I program at the micro level and thereby enable the parent to gain first hand experience about what the program is doing. Often parents never grasp the importance of the Title I funded program beyond having a superficial understanding of the general kinds of activities Title I supports in the school or school district. Their deeper involvement, however, may enable them to better understand and appreciate the program and may provide them with the experience that would help to maintain their interest.

(5) Working with the PAC should be seen as a continuing process of leadership development. As PAC members become familiar with the operation of Title I and the school/school system, they should be informed of other opportunities to gain additional experience and training. This may include participation in meetings sponsored by the state education agency, consultation with USOE regarding the regional workshops on parent involvement, presenting testimony before state and national legislative committees concerned with compensatory education, and serving on special committees established by the local or state superintendent of education. In addition, some small portion of each PAC meeting should be set aside for the purpose of carrying out a limited training activity; this should be in addition to the initial orientation and training at the beginning of the parents' service on the PAC. By providing such training and by encouraging the leadership development of parents, membership on the PAC will be regarded as an experience which is personally beneficial to parents, and that may help to maintain their interest.

(6) Rather than talking about the benefits of the Title I program, perhaps the time has come to emphasize the negative effects which would result from the absence or abuse of the program. Perhaps many parents are not interested in the Parent Advisory Council because they take for granted the services which Title I funds and assume the services are helping children. (Looking at it more cynically, perhaps they are not interested because they seen no evidence the Title I program is doing any good; one would hope this is not the case.) It may help stimulate parents' interest if they are occasionally reminded what would occur if there was no Title I program. How many children would not receive what types of services? What would be the effect on the already low achievement levels of those children? How many fewer teachers or aides would there be in the school, and what would be the real consequences of their absence? Parents who serve on the PAC need to understand their role is important because they are the advocates for the children receiving Title I services, and for the program itself. When the educational interests of those children are threatened by a program which is being maintained even though it is not resulting in significant achievement gains, or when children are being harmed by programs which result in a net reduction in achievement level, the PAC should be advocates for the children's interests. When the Title I program is threatened by a reduction in expenditures, or when Title I funds are not wisely used to help children improve their basic skills, the PAC should be advocates for a well-funded and well-managed program. If parents really understand how essential the Title I program is, and how essential their

advocacy is to the children and to the program, then they will maintain their interest in the PAC.

As we pointed out earlier, working to maintain parents' interest in Title I Parent Advisory Councils places a heavy responsibility on local Title I officials. For too long they have had the impression that the parent involvement provisions of the law and regulations are not very important. For too long they have lacked the encouragement, training, techniques, and materials to work effectively with parents. The new parent involvement requirements of Title I can provide a "new foundation" for working with parents who serve on PACs. This will occur, however, only if state and federal education officials provide the leadership and resources to Title I officials at the local level. What happens in individual school districts is directly attributable to the perceptions of local officials about which provisions of the law the state and federal officials think are really important. If we are truly concerned with maintaining the interest of parents in the PAC it is time to show we care about them and the PAC by taking seriously the parent involvement mandates of the law.